

# ☪ The INQUIRER

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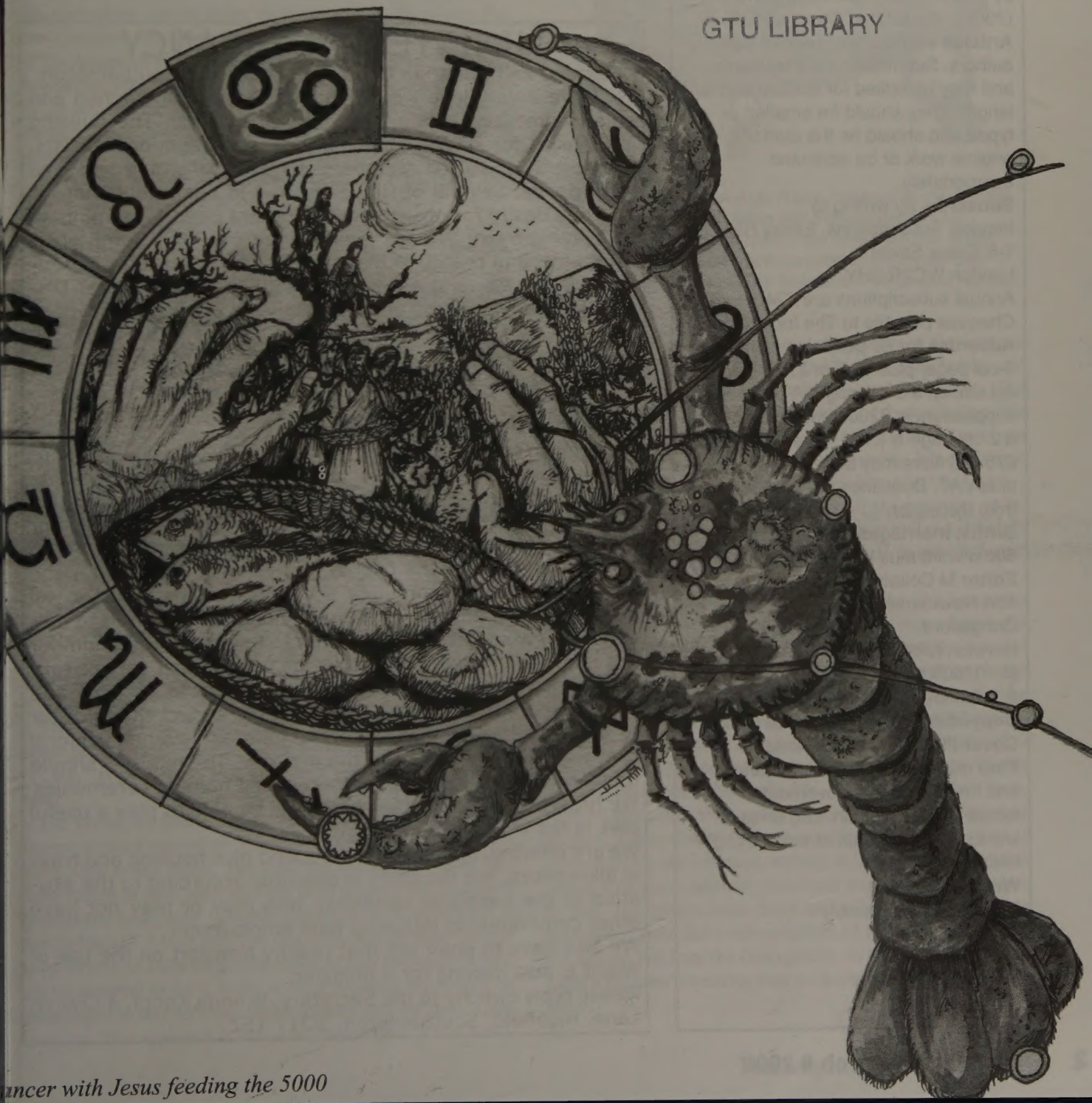
The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians Issue 7693 March 8 2008

## *Is Jesus' life a retelling of the zodiac?*

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Cancer with Jesus feeding the 5000



# The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

Established 1842

The Inquirer is the oldest

Nonconformist religious newspaper

**"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."**

*From the Object passed at the  
General Assembly of the Unitarian and  
Free Christian Churches 2001*

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## Inquiring Words

As surely as we belong to the universe

As surely as we belong to the universe  
we belong together.

We join here to transcend the isolated self,

To reconnect,

To know ourselves to be at home,

Here on earth, under the stars,

Linked with each other

—Margaret A Keip

## MINISTERIAL VACANCY

Edmund Kell Unitarian Church, Bellevue Rd, Southampton  
We have a very lovely modern chapel and hall, kitchen and quiet room sited not far from the city centre. The building is adapted for disabled people. The congregation consists, at present, of 15 full members, six associate members and four friends. Several of these are frail in health but there is a strong desire for growth and an urgent need for a minister to foster growth. We are mainly aged over 50. Some of us are involved in the wider movement such as Hucklow Experience Week. General Assembly meetings and the local District Association. Some of us are active in other organisations such as City Farm, Refugees, United Nations, etc. Within the church we do our best to help good causes through donations to charities, the General Assembly, and many others. In spiritual and theological matters there is considerable diversity but great tolerance

We seek an energetic and enthusiastic individual who will support Unitarian activities, encouraging others to use their gifts in the service of the church and the wider community (for example lunch time meditation, Saturday Coffee time, Junior Church, crèche, evening Discussions etc.) Our intention is to promote the use of the church premises as a centre for the congregation and community activities and the minister will be expected to develop this. S/he should be prepared to delegate. We would expect him or her to take an agreed number of services per month, to encourage use of other service takers, to promote congregational involvement in services and to participate in exchange of pulpits. We expect the minister to support interdenominational and interfaith events. Pastoral care would be a vital part of the ministry. The minister should be ready to take weddings, funerals and naming ceremonies. We hope that together Unitarians will be able to play a useful part in the life of Southampton.

We are offering, initially, a half-stipend plus housing and travel allowances, but flexibility is essential according to the situation of the particular candidate who may or may not have other commitments including paid employment.

We also have to point out that nearby Newport on the Isle of Wight is also looking for a minister.

Please reply directly to the Secretary, Brenda Knopf, 4 Church Lane, Highfield, Southampton, SO17 1SZ.



# Zodiac as a key to Christianity

Bill Darlison recently published a new book *'The Gospel and the Zodiac'*. Here he answers some questions about his theory that the Gospel of Mark was based on the zodiac.

**Please tell us first how you came to write this book. Is this a study or a belief you have considered for a long time?**

The idea for the book came to me quite by accident. I was teaching Religious Studies for many years, and had always been puzzled by the figure of the man carrying the jar of water who appears in Mark's Gospel (chapter 14, verse 13). No commentary could explain what role he was playing in the story. I knew that it was a representation of the zodiac sign Aquarius, but I didn't see the relevance of this. One day, while idly flicking through the text of Mark, I realised – with a start – that the basic themes associated with each of the signs of the zodiac were present in perfect zodiacal order, from new beginnings in the springtime sign of Aries to death and resurrection in Pisces. I realised, too, that this had to transform our understanding of the nature of the text. It wasn't history; it was a narrative account of very important esoteric teachings about the nature of the self and the journey of the human soul towards enlightenment. I have worked on the book, on and off, for about 15 years.

**What would you most like readers to take from this book?**

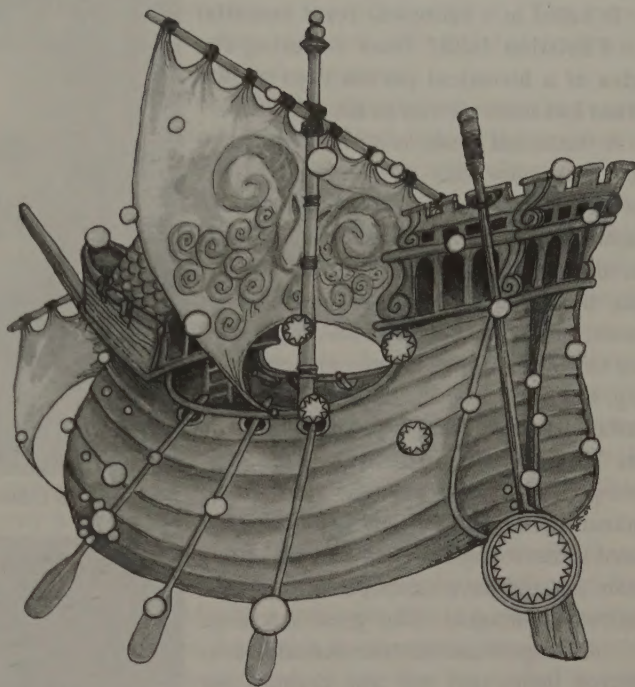
This book completely transforms our understanding of the Gospels; from being historical, or quasi-historical documents, to be 'believed' in, they are shown to be repositories of arcane wisdom. The miracle stories, which have been considered troublesome by scholars and believers alike, are rehabilitated as dramatic accounts of spiritual principles. The book shows how Christianity is related to other world faiths and so is deeply ecumenical. It is not meant to be a 'debunking' of Christianity so much as a rediscovery of its dynamic character; it interprets the Gospels in the light of the culture in which they were produced, rather than viewing them through the distorting lens of contemporary prejudices.

**What sort of reactions have you got since the book was published?**

It's sold well – over 5000 copies from October to December, which isn't too bad for a hardback. Reviewers have commented on the fact that it is well written and shows extensive scholarship, but most have been cautious about accepting the book's main premise. Kirkus Reviews in the US says that it is 'an intriguing leap into faith', which is what I really hope it to be.

**You say in your introduction, "What is one to make of those Bible stories which contain accounts of talking snakes . . . etc." Is your book just one more version of that sort of tale?**

The stories we find in the narrative portions of the Bible are almost without exception 'incredible' – animals talk, the sea parts, God walks about. The dead are raised. Literalists take these stories at face value and ask us to believe that such incidents really took place. Liberals dismiss them as 'primitive' or 'mythological'. I take the view that these stories were deliberately written in such incredible terms so that the reader would not be tempted to stick at the surface meaning but would be encouraged to take an imaginative journey into the story's real meaning. This approach is not in any sense new. It was advo-



*The Decan constellation Argo Navis, believed by the Greeks to be the ship that bore Jason and the Argonauts. This illustration, along with the one on the cover, are two of the collection created by Glasgow congregation member Dan Hodgkin for the pages of 'The Gospel and the Zodiac', by Bill Darlison.*

cated by Philo of Alexandria – a contemporary of the writer of Mark's Gospel – by Origen in 2nd century Alexandria, and by the 12th century Jewish scholar Moses Maimonides. The trouble is we have not heeded the advice of these scholars. We don't use our imagination on these stories but spend our time trying to find some underlying historical reality. We don't trust stories. We don't trust our imagination. We want 'the facts'.

**You say, "Extra-Biblical evidence for the existence of Jesus . . . turns out to be pretty thin, when examined closely". What do you say to people whose faith is based on Jesus' humanity?**

I don't know what 'Jesus' humanity' means. The Jesus who is presented to us in the Gospels is hardly a human figure. He has amazing powers which you or I do not have; he was not born as you and I were born. Everything we think we know about him is based on conjecture. We don't know what he looked like; we don't know about his personal predilections; we don't know whether he was married; apart from one incident in Luke's Gospel which occurred when he was 12, we know nothing about his early life. When the Gospels open, he is 30 years old, but we don't know how old he was when he died. The tradition we have inherited says that he died at the age of 33, but Irenaeus, writing in 2nd century, says that he has it on good authority that Jesus was well over 50 when he died. The 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild' of popular piety is constructed from the sentimentalities of Hollywood and Sunday school, not from the Gospel texts. In truth, we know more about a Dickens' character than we know about the 'historical' Jesus.

*(Continued on next page)*



# Christianity may not need historical Jesus

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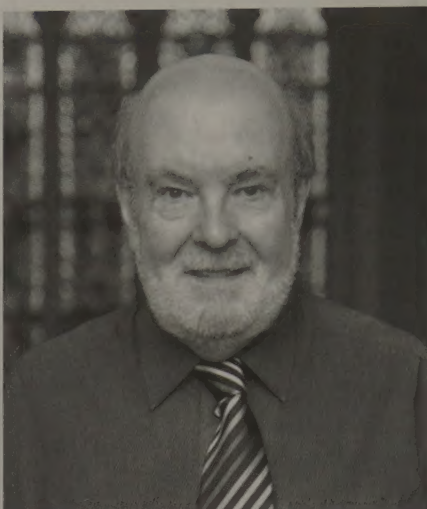
**Is belief in a historical Jesus essential to Christian faith? Does releasing the idea of a historical person then negate what has been viewed as his sacrifice?**

A 'historical' Jesus is no more essential to Christianity than a 'historical' Moses or a 'historical' Abraham are essential to Judaism. For those who believe that Jesus' death was a necessary sacrifice for human sin, then a historical Jesus is a requirement, but for liberals, who follow the ethical teachings of the Gospels, an actual living, breathing Jesus as the source of these principles is not necessary. The Sermon on the Mount – which I believe is the most comprehensive and most noble guide to human behaviour ever devised – does not need to have originated on the lips of one man. It could have developed within a religious community. The great teachings of the Gospels are not true because Jesus uttered them; they are true because our hearts acknowledge them as true. The Jesus of the Gospels was undoubtedly brave, but no braver than the countless thousands of men and women down the ages who have died for what they believe in. However, I do not deny that Jesus existed. I tend to agree with Edward Carpenter, who said that there is probably a historical nucleus for such personages as Osiris, Mithra, Krishna, Hercules, Apollo, and the rest, and that in the course of human evolution there have been certain 'nodal' points at which an actual heroic man (or woman) has appeared and given his (or her) name to a new movement.

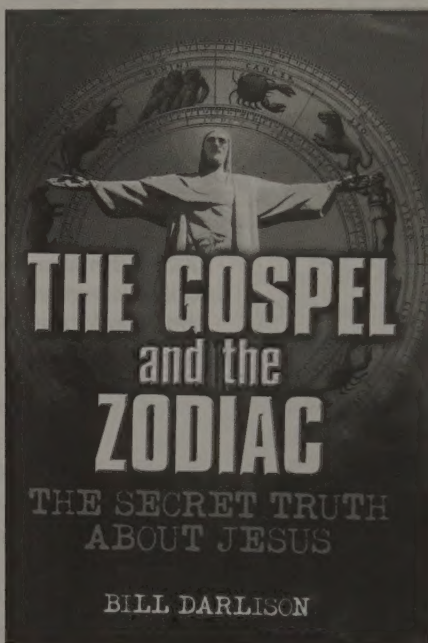
**What can the rest of us draw from your conclusions? Should we put more stock in the stars and less in the words attributed to Jesus? Should we pay more attention to serious astrologers? Is this re-interpretation a more helpful way to look at the world? Does it put Christian faith more in line with, say, Hinduism, which relies on astrology for setting weddings and important dates?**

My conclusions in no way require people to 'believe' in astrology. They just require us to accept that in the ancient world astrology enjoyed a status which we can barely imagine. Franz Cumont, the early 20th century historian of religion, said that astrology, 'the most persistent superstition ever to infect the mind of man', penetrated every aspect of life, including the spiritual and religious life of ancient peoples. I certainly don't want to encourage a belief in 'blind fate'; I don't want people to start reading their 'horoscopes' in the newspapers, or looking to omens and portents. I consider that astrology, as studied today in India and in the West, has some important lessons to teach us about the nature of life, but this is not the place to explore this vast and complex subject.

**In the publicity material for the book, you say, "It sat-**



*The Rev Bill Darlison*



**isfies the needs of those who want to follow a spiritual path using Christian vocabulary, but who are uncomfortable with the sacrifice of intellectual integrity which traditional Christianity often requires." Can you expand on that idea?**

Taking the Gospel stories literally is obviously not an option for religious liberals like ourselves, so we are left with a stripped-down New Testament, something like the Jefferson Bible, which is the New Testament without the miracles. The miracles make us uncomfortable, so we have to find 'naturalistic' explanations for them – like suggesting that the Feeding of the 5000 was really just Jesus shaming the crowds into sharing what they had hidden away. My theory is that these miracle stories are full of profound teaching. They are not historical events but 'psychological', 'spiritual' events which need to be explored with our imagination. 'Eternal life', 'rebirth', 'transfiguration', 'crucifixion', 'resurrection', 'walking on water', 'raising the dead' – all these are part of the Christian vocabulary; literalists render them nonsensical to the modern mind, but simply ignoring them, or explaining them away, as we liberals do, has robbed them of their power.

**What effect have these ideas had on your faith and on your ministry?**

I suppose I've ceased to be a 'liberal' Christian, although I still consider myself a Christian, as a follower of the spiritual principles outlined in the Gospels. I no longer accept that Christianity began as a simple ethical system propounded by a brave and compassionate individual and

then was gradually transformed into a complex theological system. I think that just the opposite is true. Christianity began as a mystery religion, as a system of personal transformation based around stellar iconography, and this system was gradually historicised. There was no 'original' Christianity beneath the mysteries. The mysteries came first, and it is the mysteries we have to rediscover. My ministry has been profoundly affected by these discoveries. I no longer shy away from the more 'troublesome' aspects of the gospel texts. For the past year in Dublin, I have preached on the Gospel of Mark – 30 sermons based exclusively on this wonderful but sadly neglected Gospel. I doubt whether even the most committed Unitarian Christian has given over quite so much time and energy to one of the foundation documents of Christianity. I think that the Gospels contain all we need for our spiritual journey; there is no real need to go elsewhere. So, what looks ostensibly like a 'hatchet job' on Christianity turns out to be just the opposite.

*Questions by MC Burns, Inquirer editor. The Rev Bill Darlison is minister to the Dublin congregation.*



# Review: 'Gospel' deserves attention

By Margaret Hamer

Bill Darlison's latest book, *The Gospel and the Zodiac*, will deservedly attract attention well beyond the limits of Unitarianism. The fact that it appears under the imprint of a mainstream publisher should ensure this. Its appeal is to three kinds of readership: the New Testament scholar, the serious student of astrology, and the curious general browser. I belong in this last miscellaneous (but far more numerous) group, and can offer only a personal opinion on what appears to be a revolutionary, and therefore highly controversial, interpretation of St Mark's Gospel. As to the topicality of the subject, a speaker on Radio 4 recently informed listeners that the number of astrologers/clairvoyants/horoscopists in France today exceeds that of Catholic priests. And the influence of astrology has been known to affect the behaviour of the international money markets. Part of Darlison's project is to rescue it from its 'cod' practitioners and to recover some of its status as a legitimate branch of learning – it is only in the last three centuries that astrology has been separated from astronomy.

**Darlison has no time** for the crystal gazing and the 'fatuous horoscopes' encountered in the popular press. For him, astrology, the language of the stars, is an absorbing academic discipline stretching back over millennia. "The Zodiac was the ancient picture-book, the story book, of the human race." It was "a mixture of primitive science, mythology, rudimentary psychology and fatalistic prophecy". Not surprisingly, he draws on a wealth of sources, theological, historical, mythical, and literary, both ancient and modern, to make his case. He cites plentiful evidence of its presence in the Jewish scriptures (including a fascinating interpretation of the story of Samson as a solar myth); he reminds us also of the astrological origins of the Christian festivals of Christmas and Easter, and sheds interesting light on the origins of the fish symbol associated with early Christianity. Although the prestige of astrology diminished as the Enlightenment progressed, it is useful to note that it continued to attract attention from some original minds; and that even so distinguished a man of science as Isaac Newton took a considerable interest in the study of alchemy and astrology and that the late Poet-Laureate, Ted Hughes, devoted years to its exploration.

Before embarking on his detailed discussion of Mark's Gospel, the author summarises standard thinking about it. It was the first gospel to be written and the least sophisticated in its style, pace and structure. It has no nativity story and opens with the baptism of the adult Jesus by John the Baptist, an initiation into his ministry. The gospel is probably incomplete and tradition associates it with Alexandria, the hotbed of Gnosticism. And it is here that the record of disputes in the Early Church becomes crucial, for the struggle was finally resolved by the victory of the factual/historical school of interpretation.

**It is against this background** that Darlison advocates that Mark's gospel is best read as an allegory of the journey undertaken by each individual towards inner enlightenment, the gradual discovery of the divinity within, which is shared by all humanity. In this context, Jesus is to be seen as the exemplar, not the saviour, of mankind. Miraculous events, such as feeding the 5000, walking on water, and the raising of the dead are not to be taken literally, but as dramatic enactments of internal

spiritual processes. The course of the spiritual journey within mirrors that of the cycle of the zodiac without. "The shapes perceived in the zodiac represent universal and archetypal symbols of human spiritual awareness".

**Darlison posits that the three synoptic gospels** drew on an earlier, clearly zodiacal, source. Mark follows the structure of that source most faithfully but Matthew and Luke are at times closer to its spirit. Even more provocatively, he postulates that the ministry of Jesus lasted only one year, commencing under the sign of Aries at the Spring Equinox and ending with his betrayal and death under the sign of Pisces. Most contentiously of all, he argues the Jesus, whose story is told in the gospel, *may not have existed as an individual*. To read Mark's gospel as a literal document is to ignore its cosmic dimension and "to distort its purpose in conveying the journey of inner illumination it embodies". The annual journey of the sun round the earth parallels the life journey of the individual. "The zodiacal way is the way we must all travel in the spiritual life".

The greater part of the book is devoted to a consideration of the constellations in sequence, relating the significances historically associated with a particular sign to a specific section of the gospel. This leads to a more general interpretation of the passages in question which can then be applied to traits and experiences in the individual spiritual life. For example, the constellation of Virgo has traditional associations with birth, harvest and children. In Egyptian mythology it is always depicted as a female divinity, very often of the goddess Isis seated with the infant Horus in her arms. Medieval depictions of the Virgin Mary follow this model. The feasts of the Birth of the Virgin and her Assumption both occur under this sign, whose key qualities are service, simplicity, humility and purity. The expression of these in the spiritual life is best seen in the simple, authentic goodness of the child. But for the adult to attain such a quality of integrity involves the energetic and constant exercise of the will. Mother Teresa of Calcutta is one example of the spiritual life achieved under the sign of Virgo.

**The attractions of this book include pictorial illustrations** (by Dan Hodgkin, a member of the Glasgow Unitarian Church), deftly chosen poetic quotations and the author's engaging translation of parts of the gospel into a very accessible modern vernacular.

Although his argument will shock some and offend others, and although some of his interpretations are more convincing than others – a fact that he readily concedes – this book is a world away from the crude sensationalism and formulaic writing of *The Da Vinci Code*. Darlison writes with elegant lucidity and authority and wears his learning lightly. In reading and re-reading sections of his discussion, I recalled something of the excitement I felt as a student when encountering EMW Tillyard's explication of the Great Chain of Being, which suddenly made a host of previously obscure references in Chaucer and Shakespeare spring into meaningful life. I look forward to this life's work achieving the informed critical attention that it merits.

Margaret Hamer is a member at Bury St Edmunds.  
*The Gospel and the Zodiac: The Secret Truth about Jesus*  
By Bill Darlison, 256 pp. Duckworth Overlook, 2007  
ISBN-10: 071563691X  
Available from [Amazon.co.uk](http://Amazon.co.uk) and from Essex Hall.



# *fm* panel: 'enabling spiritual leadership'

## *Consultation continues through GA meetings*

By Don Phillips

In his John Relly Beard Lecture at the 2007 Annual Meetings, then-General Secretary Jeff Teagle pointed out some hard truths: 74% of our 65 ministers in post are over 50 years old; 26% are 50 years old or younger; 14% would retire in 2007. At this rate, in 10 years' time, we would have only 32 ministers, 28 of whom (88%) would be over 50 years old. The lecture was the follow-up to a piece Jeff wrote in *The Inquirer* proposing an initiative called 'ministry for all congregations', which he was spearheading along with the Denominational Support and Ministry Commissions. At his GA lecture, Jeff formally launched the project under its new title '*fm*' which means '*future ministry*'. And no, that isn't a typo, '*fm future ministry*' is in lower case letters quite deliberately to emphasise that it's about ministry with a small 'm' – the ministry of everyone in our Unitarian communities, and not of ministers and of paid lay leaders. It's also about the future, rather than the present or the past. The aim is to find new ways of providing ministry – in the broadest sense – to the increasing number of congregations that don't have a minister and see no realistic prospect of being able to appoint one. Hence the strap line to the *fm future ministry* title: '*enabling spiritual leadership in all our communities*'. And I make no apology for going on about this because it's important that everyone understands that this initiative isn't just about taking another look at traditional models of ministry as a way to meet our movement's future needs. It's about new vision and new solutions. The *fm* panel has the job of developing new models of ministry. This panel isn't part of any GA Commission; it reports directly to the Executive Committee. Indeed, half of the elected EC members are members of the panel, further indicating the importance the EC attaches to the project.

Various models of ministry have, of course, been tried in different places. In addition to the single-congregation full-time or part-time ministry, there are different forms of district ministry, including the group ministry – covering two or more congregations. The *fm* panel doesn't want to just re-invent wheels, so it has been consulting the whole movement to tap this wealth of experience. That started with a questionnaire sent out to congregations last year. And, 61 congregations responded. The panel is grateful for the thorough attention those congregations put into preparing their responses. Much of the



*Delegates from all districts gathered to discuss the future of ministry at the fm consultation weekend held in February at Luther King House in Manchester. It was a weekend of 'blue sky' thinking as discussions centred around creative ways to enable spiritual leadership in all Unitarian communities. (See story right) Photo by Don Phillips*

Ministerial Fellowship's 2007 conference was devoted to the *fm* project, allowing the panel to hear the views of ministers. The panel has also been in touch with other Unitarian groups and affiliated societies, such as the National Unitarian Fellowship, the Women's League and the Women's Group, so their thoughts could be heard.

District Associations, of course, are often the most knowledgeable when it comes to successful ways of providing ministry (or, indeed, not so successful) in different situations. They met at Luther King House, Manchester, over the weekend of 9 and 10 February. Each District was invited to send two representatives with direct knowledge of organising ministry, and the panel was delighted when every single one of the 16 districts sent delegates.

The *fm* project will continue to develop until its current remit ends in 2009. We hope by then to have trialled new models of ministry in real-life situations among our Unitarian communities. It's bound to prove complex, and at times it will be a difficult task, but it's important for the future of our movement.

The final stage of consultation will be at the 2008 Annual Meetings later this month. The *fm* panel's 'slot' at Hatfield is on Thursday, 27 March from 7.30 pm to 8.10 pm. Do come along and see us – bringing an open mind and good ideas! We don't want to dig up the past and air reasons for past failure. But we are interested in past success and constructive solutions to identified problems – as well as totally new ideas for making the best use of the people and other resources we have, so that we can achieve our aim of *enabling spiritual leadership in all our communities*.

*The Rev Don Phillips is a member of the fm future ministry panel along with Joyce Ashworth, Dawn Buckle, Elisabeth Dyson-Jones, Dot Hewerdine and the Revs Cal Courtney, Steve Dick, Ann Peart, Linda Phillips, Arthur Stewart and Bob Wightman.*

**'It's important that everyone understands that this initiative isn't just about taking another look at traditional models of ministry as a way to meet our movement's future needs. It's about new vision and new solutions.'**



# ership in all our communities'

## All districts participated in recent conference

By Sue Woolley

Delegates from every District Association in the country assembled at Luther King House in Manchester last month to learn more about the Executive Committee's plans for future ministry (*fm*), and to influence those plans. It was a real "blue sky thinking" weekend, with clear communication and many good ideas being floated.

We listened to Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech, and reflected that 45 years on, a black man is the Democrat frontrunner in the race for president of the United States. Unitarians too are writing a new chapter in their history – it was time to dream dreams, and make plans to realise those dreams of "spiritual leadership in all our communities", of building vibrant, dynamic faith communities which new people will be attracted to and stay in.

Dot Hewerdine explained the background to the future ministry initiative – how it had grown out of the concern of many, not least Jeff Teagle, that the movement did not have enough trained ministers to go round, and that constructive alternatives needed to be worked out. It was generally agreed that appropriate, relevant leadership was required for all our communities.

We then split up into smaller groups and considered particular scenarios – each group was given a particular congregational situation, and asked to think around how best to approach it, with a view to growth and good leadership. All the ideas produced during the weekend – and there were many – are being circulated to delegates before the GA so that all districts can benefit from them.

A session entitled 'New models for old' was an exploration of possible different models of ministry with a small 'm'. Large sheets were pinned up around the room, each with a different model at the top. Delegates were invited to comment on each model, using post-it notes. Many sheets disappeared under a blizzard of multi-coloured notes.

We examined chasms and bridges – the barriers to change that face the Unitarian movement, and the ways in which these barriers might be overcome. This was a general mind-mapping session, with input from practically everyone present. I took frantic notes, trying to get them all down. I put my notes into two columns, and am pleased to report that the 'bridges' column was at least as long as the 'chasms' one. Again, all the good ideas will be circulated among the Districts.

Among the perceived chasms were the following: the fear of/resistance to change, financial constraints, lack of volunteers/activists with the time and skills needed, lack of communication between Districts and the GA and between Districts and congregations, and, sadly for Unitarians, a perceived lack of tolerance towards other people's beliefs in some congregations.

Among the perceived bridges were the following: making change gradual so that it will be accepted; the importance of energised people with vision; the need for skilled communication at all levels within the movement; sharing good practice; the financial generosity of the Bowland Trust; training at an appropriate level; and last – but by no means least – the



Sue Woolley

reservoir of goodwill within congregations and the denomination.

The Districts were viewed as powerful agents for change, having more resources than individual congregations, and the vital local knowledge that the GA lacks.

The delegates had the opportunity to ask some members of the Executive Committee about the *fm* process – what is happening now? These are some of the things that came out of it:

- The whole aim of the future ministry panel is to provide spiritual leadership in all our communities.
- There is now a member of staff at Essex Hall – Peter Teets – who has a specific congregational-support focus.
- Delegates were reassured that the GA was not after ministers at any price. The standards of ministerial training and entry to it remain high and the Interview Panel is very scrupulous.
- Lay Pastors are trained alongside ministers, but the academic requirement is less rigorous.
- We need to equip leaders to deal both with congregations as they are, but also train them to deal with novelty, development and change.
- A requirement for basic level training for lay people was recognised – people can't necessarily attend college full-time, or even weekly. Perhaps there should be short courses on the fundamentals with support at national level.
- The concept of "weekend" ministry – full time ministers being "lent out" over a long weekend to support weaker congregations within their district (as previously trialled in NELUM).
- The idea of "new start communities" – planting a leader and support staff in an area where there is currently no Unitarian presence.

Blue sky thinking indeed!

Delegates were invited to suggest ideas for the next steps the *fm* panel should take. It was agreed that the link with Districts was a vital one. It was suggested that the *fm* panel should work closely with the Groups Working Well and Engagement Support panels to avoid duplication of effort at GA level. It was agreed that there was no single solution for future ministry – in fact the more diverse the models, the more congregations could be served. If the GA and Districts and congregations all work together, we *can* make a difference, and our precious "uncommon denomination" will survive.

Sue Woolley represented the Midland Union at the recent *fm* process consultation weekend.



# 'Advance' brought congregation together

By Ant Howe

In a rare moment of enlightenment some months ago, it came to me that it would be a good thing if my congregation had a weekend away together. It would be the first time the Kingswood congregation had ever done this.

I made a list of reasons why we should:

a) It would give the newer members of the congregation a chance to really bond with the more established members.

b) It could be fun.

c) It would give me a chance to go to a service where I wasn't preaching and to expose the congregation to another Unitarian church.

d) Other congregations do it and seem to enjoy it.

e) It would give us a chance to relax together.

I'm sure that there are many more worthy and theological reasons why a religious community should go away together. But the one thing I was sure about is that this wasn't going to be 'A Retreat'. The very word 'Retreat' sends shivers down my spine! Apart from the fact that I have been to some truly awful retreats over the years, I think the word itself is an unwise choice. After all, we as a movement have done far too much 'Retreating' over the years: declining numbers and closing churches, etc. The one thing we certainly don't need to do is retreat any further!

I decided that if this weekend away was going to be called anything at all then it should be 'An Advance' – something we desperately need in our movement. Advancing, not retreating!

I needn't have worried. Before long, the weekend away had gained the nickname 'The Chapel Hucklow Weekend'. The way my mind works made me have visions of our ancient building squeezing itself onto a lorry and zooming up the M1 and settling itself in a field just outside Great Hucklow ... but still, at least I had successfully avoided the dreaded 'R' word! We needed 25 people to make the weekend viable. Thankfully, the number was soon exceeded. In the event, 42 adults and 6 children made their way to Great Hucklow.

The Nightingale Centre worked its magic.

The programme was loose: we just met up for meals and the rest of the time was free.

Groups of people went out on trips to various places – people who would not usually spend much time in each other's company.

Folks who perhaps are only accustomed to having the briefest conversation over a coffee after a service on a Sunday were now spending quality time together.

People visibly relaxed in each other's company.

The centre rang with laughter ... and yes, I saw one or two



*Ant Howe's congregation visited the Old Chapel at Great Hucklow while on an 'advance' at the Nightingale Conference Centre. Photo below shows the group at dinner.*

tears.

This was no Retreat – this was definitely an Advance!

And of course the traditional 'Hucklow Rules' applied: no-one cared if you were seen eating cake in a coffee shop mid-morning, just two hours after eating a cooked breakfast, with only an hour until lunch back at the centre! In my years of going to Great Hucklow, I have learnt that leaving the place *feeling* like a barrel is just as much part of the experience as the traditional walk *up* to The Barrel Pub and back!

On Sunday morning, we went to The Old Chapel for the service: a new experience for many. But straight away folk were put at ease: the chalice, the hymns, the prayers – all reminding us that Unitarians from different congregations can happily sit side by side and worship together because there are many things that unite us.

For a few minutes, it was 'my' congregation visiting another, but as soon as the service started, we became one congregation worshipping together.

I won't dwell on the fact that my congregation stood up at the wrong time for a hymn, causing much hilarity. And I certainly won't make mention of the fact that I dropped my offering on the floor as the plate came round prompting comments that I obviously wasn't used to putting money in the plate and required more experience ...

After the service, we shared one final meal together back at the centre before we made our way separately back home. The congregation would not let me leave the centre before I had made a firm booking for next year. It's now in the diary!

My only slight concern is that the magic would be lost when we got home. Will people still share as deeply with each other? Will the bonds of friendship made during the weekend strengthen the community over the coming months? I'd hate to think that we were 'Retreating' back home. I want the Advance to continue!

A few months ago in *The Inquirer*, there was a small flurry of letters as people debated the possible merits of having a residential Unitarian community. My opinion? I'm not sure I could do it *all* the time. I need space and time away from the community, but I am very glad I listened to that Inner Voice telling me that a weekend away together would be a good idea.

Does your congregation need an Advance?

*The Rev Ant Howe is minister to the Kingswood and Warwick Unitarian Congregations. This is the first of his quarterly columns for The Inquirer.*





# Hope for young people in Wales

By Ken Morgan

The visit to Cefncoed Y Cymer in South East Wales by the denomination's Youth Co-ordinator, the Rev John Harley, in mid-November was much appreciated. After surviving a weekend of travel, two workshop sessions on Saturday, and a service on Sunday, John must find even the vibrancy of London rather relaxing in comparison.

On Saturday morning, a small group of Leaders and other interested adults met in the schoolroom of the Hen Dy Cwrdd (Old Meeting House) for the first session. Coming from the cutting-edge of education – a world of white-boards and interactive displays – John seemed a little bemused by a strange piece of equipment called 'a blackboard and easel' – definitely a museum piece. However, the 'past' was not our purpose, and we were soon busily involved in discussing how the needs of today's children might best be met. Information was provided on resources already available, and we gained some hands-on experience in producing suitable work-material. The need to be mindful of regulations regarding child protection was stressed.



Ken Morgan, who officiated at the War memorial, Pauline Kendrick, Major Tudor Price, MBE, Major Stephen Price MBE, Nerys Davies, and the children who made the poppy cross.



John Harley opens Pandora's Box, watched by the masked children. Front right Marie Rosenberg – Nottage. Back row (l-r) Nerys Davies, Pauline Kendrick – Cefncoed. Photos by Phillip Griffiths

The afternoon session for the children flew by (and so did some paint!) as nine children, from Cardiff, Cefncoed and Nottage, excitedly prepared their input on the theme of Pandora's Box, for Sunday's service. Masks, vivid and varied, were painted and put aside to dry, and 'casting' and technical points relating to the performance were sorted out.

On Sunday afternoon, an inter-generational service was conducted by John, and the enjoyment of the children (now eleven in number) was evident in their performance. Their theatrical contribution and additional musical items were well received by the good-sized congregation, which included family and friends from other chapels in the SE Wales District.

Opening Pandora's Box let loose many ills – but *Hope* still remained. The children *are* the hope of the denomination – and initiatives like this successful weekend can help that hope to flourish.

## 'London's Calling' to Unitarian youth

By Bethan Hills

My day started at the Tate Modern where I met about 10 other people who were very nice! When we were all there, we went to 'the crack' (Doris Salcedo's work in the Turbine Hall titled 'Shibboleth') and sat down in a circle.

We all said our names and where we were from, then we all got into groups of two or three. Once in our groups, John gave us a task "find a picture, statue or something that we liked and report back in 30 minutes". So we set off. Annabelle, Joris and I found a video of some ants with lots of coloured paper circles. The ants were taking the circles with them to the nest and putting them in. After half an hour, we all made our way back to the crack and found the others. We all had to show the group what we had found. When it came to John's turn, he took us to the video that we had chosen! How dare he!!!!

Then came the best bit – LUNCH!!!

After lunch, we went to see a comic strip which had been drawn in the 1950s. John told us to draw a picture about something in this current decade. I drew violence and crime. It was very effective – even when I drew John in the picture!



Participants in London's Calling – a new initiative for teenagers in London and the South – gather at 'the crack' in the Tate Modern turbine hall. Look out for the next fun-packed event or contact John at [jharley@unitarian.org.uk](mailto:jharley@unitarian.org.uk)

Then, if we wanted, we could go to the shop but I didn't because I wanted to get home and write this.....

Only joking!



# Letters to the Editor

## 'Feminine in divine' article was inspiring

To the Editor:

I write to express my appreciation of the Rev Maud Robinson's article on the feminine and the divine (*Inquirer* 26 January), especially her emphasis on the importance of the experiential aspect.

For some time now, I have abandoned thinking of God in terms of one gender since, as the Tao te Ching points out, the existence of anything presupposes a female and vice versa. Consequently, I pray to 'Father, Mother God', an apparent duality but paradoxical unity. Christians can find support for this in Genesis 1:26-27, where we are told that God made humankind in God's image – male and female.

What more could anyone want?

**Alan Oates**

National Unitarian Fellowship  
Coulsdon

## Strap didn't only cause pain to children

To the Editor:

Lynne Mitchell's recent article (*Inquirer* 9 February) about a stern teacher who sometimes used the cane reminded me of the time I received the 'strap'. This was standard government-issue and had to be administered by the principal and witnessed by members of the teaching staff, presumably to avoid children being struck in anger or with excessive force.

It was an extremely embarrassing experience as they were all part of the social life of the community – as were my parents.

Mr. Dodderidge had been one of that contingent of volunteer soldiers who had left their family farms in Canada to defend Hong Kong against the Japanese. Within a fortnight of arriving on the island and being fêted by the locals, he found himself a prisoner of war in one of the notorious Japanese camps. He was still, in the 1960s, a shadow of the fit young man he had been.

We all knew he had endured torture at the hands of the Japanese and I could see that it grieved him to inflict pain on anyone, especially a child, and I was the cause of that suffering.

I cannot to this day remember what my misdemeanour was, to deserve being

struck once on one hand, but I shall never forget the anguished look on the principal's face.

That was the worst punishment of all.

**Beryl Payne**

Chatham Unitarian Church

## GA meetings are anti-democratic

To the Editor:

I agree with all the points Tony McNeil made in his letter about the General Assembly annual meetings, his comments and the suggestions he has made for reform. I have also been worried for some time about the passing of resolutions by members present at the conference which, as many of the voters are self-selected, is hardly democratic.

**Dorothy Archer**

Saddleshworth

## Annual Meetings are much too long

To the Editor:

The length of the General Assembly annual meeting needs serious consideration (The Rev Tony McNeile *The Inquirer* 9 Feb). Wednesday to Saturday is a large chunk out of the week and the cost can be daunting. The meetings could be streamlined with advantage, but I would propose a slightly longer alternative than that suggested by Tony McNeile.

Starting Friday evening would give people more time to travel, and would make it easier for younger, working members to attend than starting mid-week as at present.

Friday dinner could be used to welcome special guests and the evening would be an opportunity for people to meet each other, or could perhaps have a more structured purpose.

Saturday morning could be an abbreviated business meeting, with reports published in advance and not given verbally, but always time for questions. A limited number of resolutions could be chosen by ballot.

Saturday afternoon: a choice of workshops/presentations, possibly extending into the evening. (I found those gatherings such as Penal Reform, Historical Association, Social Responsibility, a valuable way of finding out more about fields of interest, and meeting the peo-

ple involved in them.)

Sunday morning: the anniversary service as suggested by Tony McNeile, with installation of new president, but followed by lunch to provide more opportunity for social interaction, which I think is one of the important aspects of the meetings.

A great deal could be accomplished within this time-scale, concentrating on the essentials and carrying forward the best traditions of British Unitarianism in a format relevant for the times in which we live.

**Ann Finer**

Hampstead

## Societies can't afford slots at annual meetings

To the Editor:

As Secretary of the National Unitarian Fellowship (NUF), I would endorse Tony McNeile's, letter of 9 February. Our Fellowship welcomes the opportunity to feel part of the wider Unitarian community, but we increasingly find ourselves in a position which makes it very difficult to continue our usual programme at the GA. In order to register, hire the room for our AGM, fund someone to prepare and manage the stand, plus a delegate, the cost amounts to £920. This is without any travel expenses which might be necessary and also cutting back on having our usual double session when we would usually have a speaker.

Considering the time and effort given by volunteers of societies, such as the NUF, to promote our wider Unitarian community at the GA and throughout the year, this seems short-sighted on the part of the General Assembly. I would suggest they should be investigating how it might be possible to subsidise societies such as ours in order to harness the energy these volunteers give to the movement.

Joan Wilkinson

NUF

<http://www.nufonline.org.uk/>

## GA should be more of a servant and less of a master

To the Editor:

re: Tony McNeile's letter "GA annual meetings are losing relevancy" *Inquirer*, 9 February:

What a thoroughly excellent set of pro-

(Continued on next page)



# Letters

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(Continued from previous page)  
posals.

There are few, if any, advantages to be had from an overlong annual meeting of the General Assembly, whose business may be both too boringly predictable and somewhat irrelevant to the concerns of many of its delegates. Nor is there any discernible favourable outcome from the financial hardships inflicted on the Unitarian Societies and congregations by a hungry General Assembly. We could all gain from an Assembly modest in scale, sensitive to the problems and needs of the societies and congregations and playing its part as the servant rather than the pseudo-master of the movement. As the man said, you don't find grapes on thorns or pick figs from thistles.

**Naomi Linnell**

National Unitarian Fellowship

## Meetings Panel has studied and considered alternatives

To the Editor:

Since the inception of the General Assembly Annual Meetings Panel some four years ago, it has investigated a myriad of alternatives. Tony McNeile quite rightly highlights some of the problems that groups and individuals encounter in relation to the Meetings (*Inquirer*, 9 February) all of which have been addressed by the Panel.

Our assertion is that it is imperative that a national movement such as ours, governed by a democratic constitution, facilitates a forum for all representative groups to meet for a discussion and decision-making process. In this regard, we are no different from other religious and political organisations. Having agreed this, the next issue involves the mechanics for organising such a gathering. There are many opportunities available to us relating to venue, timing, location and format – all of which link to cost.

Having thoroughly investigated conference centres, hotels and other public buildings, the Panel has ascertained that university campuses represent the optimum locations, bearing in mind the numbers, demographics and costs involved. We have considered shortening the meetings but the con-

sensus has been in favour of retaining the three- or four-day format. The Annual Meetings are more than merely a legal requirement to conduct business. They offer training, networking and spiritually renewing opportunities. Many Unitarians are members of small local communities – including the National Unitarian Fellowship. The experience of meeting others from all over the country and taking part in discussions, worship and recreation is for many the highlight of their Unitarian experience. The Panel is also committed to the Meetings taking place in different parts of the country – which we do not believe is a contentious issue.

The format of the Meetings relates directly to their length. Important changes have been introduced over the past three years. The opening ceremony has been enhanced, the opportunities for what Tony calls “microphone hogs” have been reduced and greater emphasis has been placed on worship and visionary exploration. Informal receptions have become one of the highlights. The exhibition displays by Societies, Commissions and Panels have become livelier. The format is dynamic and the Panel is pledged to constantly review the content of the Meetings.

The cost, we recognise, is a major issue. Significantly, however, at this year's prices we have received more bookings than for several years previously. We have offered generous grants towards the costs for less affluent congregations to help them sponsor a representative.

To summarise: Campuses offer the best value for money; our feedback via last year's questionnaire indicates preference for the current mix of events and length of sessions; worship, networking and recreation are seen as crucial ingredients. Our objective is to gain the maximum representation of all UK Unitarian communities.

Tony's observations are welcome as are all contributions to the debate. However, the Annual Meetings Panel is responsible to the Executive Committee for ensuring that the Meetings are well organised and appropriate to the majority wishes of our national community. This we will continue to do in sympathy with the aspirations of British and Irish Unitarians.

**Neville Kenyon**

Chair, GA Annual Meetings Panel

## News in brief

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### IARF announces July conference

A regional conference of the International Association for Religious Freedom Europe and Middle East (IARF EME) will be hosted by the Non-subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland (NSPCI) and held in Belfast on 25-27 July. The European Liberal Protestants Network (ELPN) has a conference one day earlier on 24 July. The theme is *The Liberal Dilemma: Propaganda or Dialogue?*

If you would like to receive your own copy, please send your email address to: [wyskedijkstra@casema.nl](mailto:wyskedijkstra@casema.nl) or write to Wytse Dijkstra, Meidoornpad 95, NL - 3732VS De Bilt. All over Europe, the role of religion in society has been a source of tension for centuries. The introduction of modern thinking based on ‘pure reason’ has enabled the development of political theories aimed at excluding religion from the public domain. However, this does not seem to have removed the tensions – though they may have been re-defined. Recent

events show that this line of thinking, hitherto predominant in political and sociological theory and practice, may have reached its limit. Clearly, religion is as important a part of human life, both public and private, as ever, and churches are an important factor in civil society.

The aim of the ELPN and IARF conferences is to explore the role of liberal religious thought in this ongoing process. The ELPN conference will focus on the existing Liberal Protestant structures and their mission. On the first day of the IARF conference, the focus of the programme will be to establish the present situation concerning liberal religious thought in society. On the second day, an effort will be made to outline the part it should ideally play.

The conference is based on the idea that religion without consequences for the reality of human life is no more than dogma. Details on speakers and housing are being finalised.





## GA president visits Northern Ireland

Cold, clear February weather but a warm, friendly welcome greeted General Assembly President the Rev Celia Midgley when she accepted an invitation from the minister, the Rev Chris Hudson, to visit All Souls Church, Belfast. She conducted morning worship which was held in the adjacent hall, as the church building is undergoing a major renovation in time for their tercentenary celebrations. Celia's theme, focusing on the importance of congregations, and their relationship with the place where they worship, was highly appropriate and well received.

The visit also provided an opportunity for a discussion evening, in which a lively exchange of views explored relationships with other denominations as well as relations between the GA and the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church of Ireland (NSPCI). It is hoped that this visit will help bring the NSPCI and the Unitarian denominations closer.

Pictured with Celia is the Rev Nigel Playfair, clerk to the General Synod of the NSPCI.

## Revised funeral services leaflet available

The leaflet *Funeral and Memorial Services – the Unitarian Way* (with text by the Rev Peter Hewis) has now been revised and reissued. Copies will be available at the Annual Meetings in Hatfield and congregations may find it convenient to collect them there.

Copies (up to 50 per congregation in the first instance) may also be requested from Essex Hall. Postage costs will be charged.

Adequate copies of the general leaflet *A Faith Worth Thinking About* should be available at Hatfield for congregations to replenish their stocks.

— Howard Hague

## The Sentence of Scheherazade: Telling Our Stories to Live

This workshop will help you to share stories and help to make worship more vital and compelling. It offers a way to become more comfortable and creative with worshipful storytelling. Led by the Revs John Harley and Linda Hart, *The Sentence of Scheherazade* will offer an opportunity to think about the place of stories in worship, learn some of the tools and techniques for excellent storytelling, and time to practise in a creative and supportive environment.

Open to ministers, lay leaders and anyone who leads worship and wants to hone their storytelling skills. Sponsored by the LDPA, the two-part workshop is planned for 3 June and 1 July from 11 am to 4 pm at Unity Church, Islington. Participants should bring along a packed lunch, beverages will be provided.

Contact Linda Hart (revlahart@gmail.com) for information or to register.

## Touching Wholeness: The Way of Silence

In our searching for a sense of wholeness in our lives, learning to be quiet and to find a stillness within is a powerful tool. Join with others in this mindful retreat on April 18-20, where participants will explore silence in a variety of ways. Those on the weekend will walk a labyrinth, use art materials and creativity, employ movement, and experience the power of our presence to each other in our search.

The retreat will be held at Duncton Mill Retreat Centre, a highly rated, lovely site located in West Sussex. Co-leaders the Revs John Harley, Linda Hart along with Andrew Pakula will guide the time with reflections, meditation and instruction. All are welcome to participate in this weekend of exploration and rejuvenation.

Arrivals are after 17.00 on Friday. The programme begins at 19.30 and ends at 14.30 on Sunday. For more details on accommodation, see Duncton Mill's web site: [www.dunctonmill.co.uk/](http://www.dunctonmill.co.uk/).

The cost is £190 before 18 March or £200 after 18 March. All meals are included in the price of the retreat. All retreat supplies and materials will be provided, including meditation cushions and yoga mats.

Only 17 spaces are available. Participants will be booked on a first-come, first-served basis. Refunds of 80% are available upon cancellation before 18 March. For more information and a registration form see [www.ukspirituality.org/](http://www.ukspirituality.org/) or phone 078 09144879.

— Andy Pakula



Great Yarmouth Old Meeting held a membership service on Sunday 3 February, when the congregation formally welcomed three new adult members. Attendance has been increasing in recent years, with an average of 16 at Sunday services.

— The Rev Chris Wilson